I would like to start with an extract from a personal story. This was written about four years ago, recalling something that occurred four years earlier.

Horst, an old family friend, had been at my father’s funeral. I had driven him home that night, late, after the wake, and on my way back to the family home I found myself parked in a quiet alcove in a pine forest, near a lake and crying a torrent. It was the first time I had really been alone since the death. Up until then there had always been people around and always things to do. It was also the first time I had felt the loss enter into my body and shake me beyond conscious control. My tears grabbed me. I didn’t know where they came from. It was as if the rust, the grit, the debris right at the bottom of my emotional tank had been rattled then shaken free. I didn’t know I felt so deeply or so strongly. It gutted me. I hadn’t cried for years and that night I cried myself out, I don’t know how long it took but finally I regained sufficient equanimity and drove the final three kilometres back to the family home. The house was dark, the guests were gone and everyone staying overnight was in bed. I sat for a while in the emptiness of the living room, the dog came and lay at my feet and I remembered so many of the things that had happened between these walls. My
thoughts twisted, shifted, and shuffled until exhaustion finally set in.

Writing this experience helped me, at the time, to ‘name’ and ‘feel’ the depth of the impact of these events. ‘Naming’ is a curious process and it is central to the inquiry that I, like all writers, find myself within. In this essay I want to make this inquiry overt. I want to personalise it and contextualise it and present it as a pivot that determines, in an ecological sense, the extent and depth of the relationships—social, environmental, spiritual, incidental—that determine the ways and means whereby we create and participate in cultural consciousness.

Naming has long been known as a powerful system for the determination of understanding. The story of Babel, in the New Testament, for example, demonstrates an awareness of the implications inherent in naming. This is the story of a people, of one language, who seek to build a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven.” Whether ‘heaven’ is understood metaphorically or actually, this goal can be read as an explicit challenge to God’s determination of—his ‘naming’ of—the relationship between ‘heaven’ and ‘earth.’ By reaching ‘unto heaven’ these people, of one language, acquire the potential to identify and name this relationship for themselves (Wright 1998). Genesis suggests that God is threatened by this determination. Accordingly, God attacks the language of his/her ‘antagonists.’

7. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.

8. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

9. Therefore is the name of it called Babel: because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of the earth. (Genesis 11:7-9).

Language is also subject matter in the New Testament. Most significantly in St. John’s frequent references to Jesus as the Divine Word: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1.1.14). It is negotiated in other ancient philosophical works. Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus made the “Logos”—the Greek term for ‘word’—central to his philosophy. He asserts that the logos is the rational principle that governs the universe. “Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one” (Allen 1966: 10). Another pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides extends this concept by arguing that language, thought, and being are inextricable. He claims, “that which can be spoken and thought needs must be” (45). An equivalent understanding is contained in the Taoist text, the Tao Te Ching, where much is made of the relationship between ‘naming’ and ‘knowing.’ Central to Taoism is the image of the ‘Tao’ (or the ‘Way’) as ‘the uncarved block.’ Because it is the source of all things, it is nameless. “Though the uncarved block is small, it may be subordinated to nothing in the world.” However, “once the block is cut, names appear” (De Bary 1960: 57). The first chapter of the Tao Te Ching (Chan 1963) makes immediate reference to the interpretation of experience through name.

The way (Tao) that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

But where does ‘name’ come from, and how are the limits of naming encountered? In a letter written to me about six years ago, British performance poet Aaron Williamson helped me imagine my way into this question. He wrote,
I am greatly concerned with the sheer inability of our linguistic selves to cope with the emotionality that surpasses and overruns our experience of communication. I’m interested in the unrepresentability of emotion as it reaches strengths and depths at which language literally fails us. And yet, we have no other medium, no other direction to turn than to attempt to convert what we experience into language... I’m interested in the idea that here, language departs from its functional mode into areas of possibility which may not relate to its ability to close around something (an emotion, feeling) which is in itself concerned with being freed. So there may be a conflict of interest between our need to release... and our desire to be understood. This means we may need to discover new modalities of communication precisely at the point where our established ones are discovered to be inadequate.

(Williamson, pers. corresp. 1997.)

Williamson (1993) is a poet and a performer. He is also profoundly deaf. The subject matter of much of his work is the experience of sound. I remember the time I first encountered his work. I was in the city. I was going to see a performance by British actor, writer and director Stephen Berkoff. The show began at 8pm. It was 5pm. I needed a bookshop to occupy at least one of those hours and something to read as I sat in the theatre foyer for the remainder of that time. I chose the book not because I knew anything about the author or the book, but because of an extract printed on the back cover. The extract read,

A book is in the act of becoming. It arises from the futility of searching for its own components. Everything here is fastened into its rigid embrace, especially the futility of its search.

The ‘book’ and its ‘becoming’ caught me. I liked the suggestion that a book, like a person perhaps, ‘becomes,’ rather than ‘is’; just as I liked the suggestion that the reader, like the writer, participates in the creation of the book—the person, the life—through its reading: that the final product is something that gathers thoughts and give them identity under a specific imprimatur. I was drawn also to the image of a book arising from “the futility of searching for its own components.” Which book was this? Which person? Which book was this not? Which person was this not, as well?
Curiously now, I remember I did not learn Williamson was deaf until some time after this first encounter. For a long time, for the writer to be deaf did not matter. Despite the fact that his deafness is central to his work, I found my way into the writing without any need to consider such a possibility. I came to see his pain not as the pain of a disabled poet—nothing so obtuse, nothing so romantic—I saw it as the pain of the social world. “The text is born of yearning. It accumulates the need. Pain is stacked through its racks, stratified… The clag of guilt for feeling the pain. The text collects it, consists in it” (20). So, for Williamson, the naming is a consequence of the action—the yearning. What’s more, it feeds back into understanding to enable consciousness to engage it more fully.

Now of course, it may seem ridiculous that I did not appreciate Williamson’s deafness and the hurt arising from it, that I did not extract myself from the writing, identify the condition and recognise the driving force behind the work. To do so, to an extent, would have been to indemnify myself, to deny my own ‘deafness’ to so much of life. Consequently, my reading of the work was not detached. It was embodied. I was absorbed in the communication. Williamson’s challenge was made available to me. His language rippled with it, through me. I was the book. I was the ‘becoming.’

Learning of his deafness came almost as a relief. It released me from the intensity of his writing. It gave me an opportunity to contextualise—an excuse to avoid—his power. Exactly how or when the condition became apparent I cannot recall precisely. Entering into and appreciating his use of language was sufficient in the early stages. It was as if I, like Williamson, found it convenient not to focus on the obvious truth. “The affliction: Don’t mention it. Untalked around. It speaks itself” (22). For Williamson—limited in his capacity to participate in sound, hence drawn to reflect upon its nature—participation is a profoundly challenging experience. The action of participating is a self-limiting process. Learning of his deafness was made available to me. His language rippled with it, through me. I was the book. I was the ‘becoming.’

No. The limits of language are the limits of language. For here is the person before language. Not able, finally, to disappear. Capable of human form.
(Williamson 67)

For Williamson is a performer as much as he is a poet, and any attempt to contain his communication in spoken language runs counter to his intent. He not only seeks to, but needs to, move beyond verbal forms. He needs to find the language that resounds throughout the action—the living and the stage happens to be a medium for its exploration. Performing, in such a domain admits what Pippen and Eden (1997) describe as the ‘edgeman and woman’—those who walk the liminal space, beyond safe and familiar ground—to consciousness. The consequence is a construction of sound, in performance, that neutralises objective analysis and demands an embodied response. It is this embodied response that is central to my concerns in this discussion here.
In a post-modern world our authority is constantly in negotiation. As claimant, via this text, to a form of authority, I invite you into my passionate embrace. I want to do so via the concept of learning. Learning is a concept—a construction—and this is the substance of its actuality. It is something that is arrived at and agreed upon or evaluated in utilitarian terms. It serves a need. The self and others define that need in relation to some actual or imagined community: the community that validates pre-schoolers or netball umpires or bricklayers or therapists or boot-scooters or political leaders. Hence tests, examinations, in depth analyses and other means of calling to account. The aircraft coming into land tests the learning of the pilot. The patient in the surgery tests the learning of the doctor. The supplicant in search of salvation tests the learning of the clergyman. But how does this approach accommodate the notion of ‘becoming’ alluded to by Williamson? From this perspective, the test is not the important thing. What is most important is the ‘becoming’ of the pilot, the surgeon, and the clergyman and, as a consequence, the relationship between that becoming and other participants in the process—the passengers, the patient, the petitioner, and the communities they inhabit.

For Williamson, a deaf man encountering sound, who, other than the deaf man himself, can be the final arbiter? Who can credibly claim to credential something as imponderable as this man’s sonic experience? If such knowing cannot be constructed, how can it be affirmed, because affirmation is central to any experience of learning. Williamson’s answer, and it is an important answer, is, in the body.

A four year old boy / resides in a small room / within a remote building /
filled with starched adults / he remembers his parents / and begins to feel /
their absence palpably / as part of the room / and why he is in it / the adults 
have words / for him and a use / Tabula Rasa they call him / clean slated / is the Solo Boy / ‘he isn’t even here.’

languageless / magnetised / and driven into here / as the embodiment / of its 
polarity / this place of conversation / of massive convolutions / dialect,
diction, discourse / the boy is padded round / walls soaked through / with 
stereile terminology / The basement place / of Babel / —it isn’t hard to see / in them what they see / in him / after all, they define it. (Williamson, 62)
Williamson forces me to encounter my own isolation. It compels me to consider the way in which I made meaning within that isolation. It asks me to imagine the influence of others imaginings on me. I find myself in negotiation, in conversation—in retrospect and projection—with my body, my imagination, and my partial understandings. I find myself within this breathing, eating, sleeping, sexual thing, with its circulatory system and its immune system and its skeletal structure and its genetic code, its consciousness and its unconsciousness, within these becoming things called family, community and culture, within this becoming called life. Without some consciousness of my own becoming—my own transformative experience of being, which exists in part through my naming of it—it is impossible to appreciate any becoming or transformation beyond my self: indeed, it becomes impossible to appreciate change and the systemic boundaries within which change occurs.

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987) describe this form of engagement as ‘structural drift’: a process that is identified, named, and explained in retrospect. ‘Drift’ arises in association with their discussion of self-organising systems and the structural coupling between systems that establish the preconditions for self-consciousness and reflection. It is work on the biology of cognition. The systemic and structural analyses of Maturana and Varela work with processes such as ‘becoming’ (rather than being), ‘languaging’ (rather than language) and ‘emotioning’ (rather than emotion).

These are recognised as actions, as participatory events, conditional upon the circumstance of their occurrence. They form the basis of an ecological epistemology—knowledge built out of the network of relationships we inhabit—designed to elicit conversation about ways in which participants make meaning from experience. This facilitates a discussion that incorporates the social and environmental dimensions of our relationships. It is what Emery and Trist (1975) refer to as our ‘social ecology.’ Social ecology is, in this sense, a way of knowing that places the learner within the container of his or her own learning, bound by the challenge of appreciating limits to understanding. Williamson’s deafness and language itself (because language is that through which language is known) are dynamics of this kind.

Drama, theatre, and performance are rich in research in and through embodied processes. The nature of the reality that is constructed in performance is central to its generative power. It is dependent upon the inter-play of an intricate network of relationships and assumptions. It can, in this respect, be seen as supplying the preconditions for a knowledge form derived from the interwoven environment it is situated within. The process of performing is one in which an embodied consciousness discovers itself in negotiation with its environment. This is because of more than the stories the body of the performer tells. It is because of the embodied consciousness the performer works with and through. Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, for example, uses a variety of exercises to develop this consciousness. ‘Feeling what we touch,’ ‘listening to what we hear,’ and ‘seeing what we look at’ are priorities in Boal’s training. He describes them as physical reflections upon the self (Boal 1992: 60). They are designed to enhance the experience of the performer in ‘the world’ the performer ‘brings forth.’ Identifying or ‘naming’ them in this way compels the performer to not simply ‘feel,’ ‘listen,’ or ‘see’ but to bring heightened consciousness to these actions, in language and emotion. This is an initial movement in the feedback system we encounter and identify ourselves within.

In a study of the recent history of actor training, Pippen and Eden (1997) draw attention to the transformative process inherent in various approaches to actor training (36). They argue that, “the most useful attitude (for actors is) … one of reflective self awareness of the motor-sensory process… and, simultaneously, heightened awareness of the ‘other’” (57). Accordingly, they are advocates for the extensive use of body based learning techniques such as Feldenkrais and Alexander Technique in actor training. They contrast this with self-conscious and self-absorbed approaches, and explore them in terms of the cognitive theories expounded by Maturana and Varela. Accordingly, they argue, “while emotions
may begin in bodily chemical reactions, it is in the domain of behaviour that we detect them. We identify love, aggression, fear, and playfulness in ourselves and others through the things we do” (69). This is consistent with Stanislavski’s focus on the consciousness of the body of the actor. Despite his historical association with ‘emotional memory,’ it is the actions rather than the emotions of the actor that were central to Stanislavski’s ‘method.’ Recent research that reveals the significance he placed on yoga, for example, underlines this (Carnicke 1998). Emotion emerges from the sequential logic of the action inherent in the narrative the actor is playing. Such a process, according to Stanislavski, enables both conscious and subconscious narratives to emerge (1980a, 1980b).

This overt attention to embodied consciousness ensures drama, theatre, and performance are remarkably appropriate laboratories for research into the relationship between bodies, minds, communication, and learning. When the focus becomes the meaningful relationships that are ‘bought forth’ in the ‘dance’ of ‘languaging’ and ‘emotioning’ it would seem refinements to systems of knowing can be bought about by attention to the kinaesthetic construction of that knowing. This occurs in individual and social forms wherein the body is recognised as containing a deep reservoir of knowledge about meaning and relationship. Such recognition, Pippen and Eden suggest, changes the performer if only because, “this enmeshing in language and behaviour is,” they say, “where the actor lives” (79). But it is also where each and every one of us can live, in slightly different ways. This is especially so when we take the time to reflect upon and recognise it. The key difference between the actor in the performance space and each of us, in everyday life is, as Pippen and Eden point out, “the contract between actor and audience that ‘play’ is happening” (85). In life beyond the performance space it cannot be assumed that others are willing or able to appreciate social life in terms of ‘play.’

In the performances of Aaron Williamson, play and life meet at a powerful and dramatic edge: a place where truth is sung to bodies unaccustomed to hearing in such ways. A body of emotion is presented. It is inescapable for both Williamson and some, if not all his audience. By identifying the death of my father as an essential part of my knowing I, like Williamson, am bringing forth an emotional body of work. I am admitting, acknowledging, indeed arguing in a most plaintive and passionate form for the dance of my feeling to be bought forth. But it is not just my dance. In terms of learning, it is my world; the world I live in, share and co-create.

My abiding fascination with emotion arose as a consequence of a series of strong emotional experiences of my own. Suddenly the world was different. Under its influence, I experienced very directly how strong emotion changes how the world is encountered and how one participates in it. It was not just me. Suddenly, the world was in tears.

If emotion is transformative, in that it transforms the world I live within, it does more than change my mind. It changes my embodied response to that world. It forms me physiologically. My interest therefore is in my mind-body’s relationship to strong emotional experience. For me, an associated question is, how to talk or write about this. There is of course much conceptual work, as far as emotion is concerned. This tends to focuses on the experience. For example, Dave Eggers (2000) in his autobiographical fiction, ‘A heartbreaking work of staggering genius’ writes most eloquently about feelings,

We feel that to reveal embarrassing or private things... we have given someone something, that, like a primitive person fearing that a photographer will steal his soul, we identify our secrets, our past and their blotches, with our identity, that revealing our habits or losses or deeds somehow makes one less of oneself. But it’s just the opposite, more is more is more—more bleeding, more giving... How can these things be mine? Holding me responsible for keeping secret this information is ridiculous. I was born into a town and a family and the town and my family happened to me. I own none of it. It’s everyone’s. It is shareware. I like it, I like having been a part
of it, I would kill or die to protect those who are part of it, but I do not claim exclusivity. Have it. Take it from me. Do with it what you will. Make it useful. This is like making electricity from dirt; it is almost too good to be believed, that we can make beauty from this stuff. (188-189)

But the feelings are his subject matter. What it feels like, with the emphasis on what it feels like, is another thing. Language is of course complicit. Recognition is the key factor. So we speak and write of it—as emotional bodies—continually. We are ‘festering with hate,’ ‘overflowing with love,’ ‘brimming with enthusiasm,’ ‘shaking with anger,’ ‘spluttering with indignation,’ ‘simmering in fury,’ ‘lost in faith,’ and ‘deep in sorrow.’

There are some wonderful parts in the book, Emotion Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space, where Sue Cataldi (1993) constructs a compelling discussion of the physical encounter with feeling: “the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat… It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (103). Citing J.J. Gibson she argues that “If depth means the dimension of an object that goes with height and width, there is nothing special about it… If depth means distance from here, then it involves self-perception and is continuously changing as the observer moves about.” (30). Cataldi’s circles draw me into my own feelings and memories. Depth of emotion, in this sense, requires I negotiate my self, my sensitivity, my encounter with that sensitivity. For, as that sensitivity is encountered, it becomes clear that emotion is more than just a sudden interruption to complacency: much more than a dramatic encounter with love, grief, fear or regret. Here it is worth considering a definition offered by Candace Pert (1997). While an extended response to her physiological analysis of emotion is subject for another paper, her working definition deserves to be re-stated. Pert writes;

When I use the term emotion I am speaking in the broadest of terms, to
include not only the familiar human experiences of anger, fear, and sadness, as well as joy, contentment, and courage, but also basic sensations such as pleasure and pain as well as “drive states” studied by experimental psychologists such as hunger and thirst. In addition to measurable and observable emotions and states, I also refer to an assortment of other intangible, subjective experiences that are probably unique to humans, such as spiritual inspiration, awe, bliss, and other states of consciousness that we have all experienced but that have been, up until now, physiologically unexplained. (131-132)

I am drawn to conclude that we encounter the world in emotion: emotionally. Our communication ripples with it. The subtle nuances of contentment are no less emotional than the alienating terror of rage. To deny that constancy is to fail to acknowledge the richness of that through which we encounter, or in Maturana and Varela’s terms, ‘bring forth,’ our world. Thus it is found in learning and the environment within which learning arises. To ignore, deny, block, impede or otherwise overlook the learning bought forth through the interweaving of languaging and emotioning is to detach, and seek to know from without, an ongoing experience of immersion.

God’s decision to ‘scatter… abroad’ the people of Babel is an action of this kind. Not only did the incident at Babel lead to a shattering of the unity of language, it lead to a confounding and dispersal of peoples, each no longer able to share in speech and belief. It led to God’s designation that one of those families or tribes or nations was pre-eminent.

2. And I will make thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:

3. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curseth thee; and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 12:2-3)

As a consequence of the aspiration to name, pursued in the land of Shi’-nar, that which was once unity became diversity, thence division. Out of one language came many. Out of understanding came misunderstanding, then conflict. Foregoing equanimity, God took sides.

In working towards a conclusion, another contribution from Aaron Williamson seems appropriate.

There is something untouchable and yes, preposterous here. Petrifying. Indeed, we are captive, stricken in its stare. Our fear preserves and confirms its secret and isolation creeps in from the loss of antennae; from the loss, that is, of our response. Out of the deadlock, the distance sense is spun amok. We are going it alone. No means by which to monitor this thought and feeling. Within the silence, head to head, the ear is our mirror. (17)

Fritof Capra (1996) uses the phrase ‘the web of life’ to summarise the intricate encounter with the inter-weavings of organisms, social systems, and ecosystems through which we make meaning. In that process we find, along with ourselves, our structural limitations. Collectively, these include urbanisation, desertification, climate change, increasing gaps between rich and poor and north and south, deafness, blindness, ignorance. The excitement and beauty and sensuality of learning gives rise to the challenge to acting to overcome the selfishness that accompanies isolation and alienation. It is an inadequate appreciation of the extent of the web of life that enables loneliness and all its concomitant re-activities to root us in fear. A fear of learning is a fear of living.

References


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